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From Man to Monster: The Fall of Walter White

Matthew St. Blanc

Ella V. Schwing Award Winner

As he sat on Jesse's toilet, he contemplated his little problem in the basement below. As was typical for a man like Walter White, he was making a list of pro's and con's, and weighing his options. Only this was no ordinary list, and this was no ordinary problem. He was deciding on whether to kill the man he was holding captive. On the "kill him" side, he had only one entry, "He'll kill your entire family if you let him go". After as much reflection as he could bear, he made his way downstairs. He didn't have a plan. He had no idea how he was going to do it. Krazy-8, a drug dealer who wanted Walter's meth recipe, wasn't going to be Walter's first kill, not even his first kill of the day. But Emilio, Krazy-8's accomplice, was killed in a rush, almost collaterally during Walter's escape earlier that day. Killing Krazy-8 would be different. Krazy-8 was shackled at the neck by a large bike lock to a pole in the basement. He was a captive, blind, unarmed, and weak. This would be premeditated murder, but it had to happen. In the basement, confronted only by Krazy-8 and his own morality, he made his move. Krazy-8 attempted to defend himself with the shard of a broken plate, but it was too late. Walter had a firm hold of the back of the bike lock around his neck and pulled as hard as he could. Strangling him was harder than Walter thought, so he braced his foot on the pole in front of him and put all his weight into strangling the life out of his captive. Krazy-8 continued to flail wildly, eventually striking Walter's leg with the broken plate, but his attempts were futile. Luckily for Walter, his wounds were minor. Finally, he felt Krazy-8 go limp. This was it. He was dead. Walter White has just committed cold-blooded, calculated murder. The monster inside of him has just been released.

Breaking Bad took over AMC's prime-time slot for 5 seasons, from 2008 to 2013. The show proved to be a juggernaut for the network, earning many awards and accolades throughout its tenure, as well as gaining a massive following from its viewers. *Breaking Bad* follows mild mannered husband, father, and high school chemistry teacher Walter White (played by Bryan Cranston), and junkie, former student, and all-around loser Jesse Pinkman (played by Aaron Paul) throughout their descent into the darkness of drug manufacturing and murder. The show is unbelievably dark in its story arc and the producers made sure that this darkness was presented on the screen as well. Anna Faktorovich, who wrote her own review of the show in the Pennsylvania Literary Journal wrote, "To be frank, the actors in *Breaking Bad* are some of the ugliest people on prime-time TV..." and although she intended this as harsh criticism, this was exactly the kind of visual representation the show's producers intended. *Breaking Bad* was never meant to make the viewers feel good about what was happening. It was about watching a man, any man, really, using his pride, greed, and anger to transform himself into a nefarious, vile character.

Unlike most of the people I know, I didn't watch *Breaking Bad* during its original airing. My wife and I, having become bored with the standard cable fare provided by networks such as HGTV and The Travel Channel, decided to watch it on Netflix at the end of 2015. We were looking for something exciting and imaginative to wind down to after a long day over some wine, and in *Breaking Bad* we found exactly what we were looking for.

What ultimately fascinated me with the show was Walter White's evolution as a character. James Poniewozik of *Time Magazine* said in his review of the show "He's not just a criminal who's like us... he was one of us..." So how could such an average man, someone so meek and unassuming, one of us, become so broken that he completely transforms into this detestable monster, Heisenberg? Although Walter is initially clumsy in his criminality, he managed to find himself at the top of greater New Mexico's drug trade. He used his expertise in chemistry to manufacture nearly pure crystal methamphetamine with the goal of leaving his family enough money to live on after he dies of lung cancer. It didn't take Walter long to make money hand over fist, exceeding his needs and expectations. In the early days of Walter's transformation, he was weak and timid, struggling with the morality of his actions. He was, after all, a decent, hardworking, family man.

So, where did this change in Walter begin? Some may argue that it began with his diagnosis of lung cancer, but truth be told, it began long before. It was years of missed opportunities, watching former colleagues and friends surpass him professionally, socially, and financially. It was his poor business decision to buy out of a tech startup for \$5,000 while his partner went on to make billions. It was the feeling of apathy he got from his wife, Skylar. Walter went through his life feeling as if he never made his own choices. He felt like he was along for the ride, never in control of his own destiny. Although he had a lifetime of events that laid the foundation for Heisenberg, it was his diagnosis of terminal lung cancer that illuminated the path for him to follow. Walter decided that he'd had enough, and he was determined to take control of what was left in his short life. His need for control ultimately led him to manufacturing meth. The idea was that he was doing it for his family. He needed \$737,000 to leave for his wife and children, at least that's how it began. Over time, Walter got drunk on the power he'd attained. Walter felt alive, in control, master of his own fate. He tried to excuse his behavior by using his family as a crutch. He was doing all of this for them, so he still had to be the good guy, right? At least that's what he told himself.

Two of the most outstanding moments in his realization that he had become the villain in his own story occurred between him and his wife. In the episode titled *Cornered*, aired in the show's fourth season, while arguing with Skylar over their family being in danger, Walter shouts, "I'm not in danger, I AM the danger! I'm the one who knocks [on the door]!" He was seething with resentment and pride. He was finally good at something; he was finally in control (so he thought) of his destiny. In the fifth and final season, in the episode titled *Felina*, during another confrontation with his now estranged wife, he admits to her "I did it for me. I liked it. I was good at it... and I was alive." It was here, that although he had become an utterly detestable character, you could still see a shred of the old Walter left inside of him. It became easy to fall into the trap of seeing

Walter as the victim instead of the victimizer. It was this transformation from man to monster, which Bryan Cranston pulls off flawlessly, that kept me engaged and so eager for more that I couldn't help but follow the show to its conclusion.

Cranston, previously most recognizable as a comedic actor having starred in the sitcom *Malcolm in the Middle*, no doubt found the role challenging, having to pull all his skills together to form this man/monster amalgamation. Throughout the show these changes in Walter White's persona seemed to flow from Cranston organically as he effortlessly flowed between the average man that he was to the nefarious, power hungry, Heisenberg.

In my opinion, Walter's descent into darkness is the show's sole purpose. Jonah Goldberg of *The National Review* points this out in his review of the show, "[Vince] Gilligan calls it 'a slow-motion *Wolfman* story.'" He also adds, "The change that... takes place in Walter is so gradual, so human, that viewers are hard pressed to relinquish their fondness for him..." His change is so slow, so agonizing, that you can't help but feel a little sorry for him despite the swathe of destruction he's left in his two-year crime spree. Because his transformation is so gradual, many of the viewers have no idea whether to love, or loathe, Walter White. Without this level of humanity, *Breaking Bad* would have slipped into mediocrity and been lost in the sea of all the other, average, cookie cutter style crime-dramas. Following Walt's evolution in its entirety helps the viewer to believe that he still holds on to a shred of his humanity upon its conclusion, thus keeping the viewer emotionally involved. This emotional connection, good or bad, with the characters and their stories is ultimately one of the keys to the show's success.

Breaking Bad as an antihero-drama enjoys success with shows like *Dexter*, *The Walking Dead*, and *Boardwalk Empire*. Where *Breaking Bad* sets itself apart, is that with other shows in its category, there's a definite line in the sand between the good guys and the villains. The characters in *Breaking Bad* are continuously evolving, step by step, blurring that line and even stepping over it from one side to the other like it's a crack in the sidewalk. Because of this ambiguity, the characters maintain a level of humanity that would otherwise be lost.

The show breaks away from the standard mold of the antihero-drama successfully because there is no real antihero, there's just an average man who transforms himself into a villain. According to The Internet Movie Database, *Breaking Bad* capitalized on its success with a long list of awards with 222 nominations and 141 wins, including winning 16 Primetime Emmy's. The show in its 5 short seasons became one of the most highly regarded shows on modern television. Had it not been for Bryan Cranston, Walter White wouldn't have had the same impact on the shows viewers, and likely wouldn't have enjoyed the success that it has. He fused Walter and Heisenberg together so completely it became hard to imagine one without the other. He took us with him on his emotional journey where, with him, we've felt sadness, horror, exhilaration, success, and failure. Walter White is so easy to relate to that I wonder if there's not a little Heisenberg waiting inside all of us.

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